

Asturian Revolution of 1934

The **Asturian Revolution** was a major conflict that happened in [Asturias](#) from October 4-19, 1934. It started with a mass [strike action](#) undertaken by miners in against the new government which included the conservative [CEDA party](#).^[1] The strike and subsequent demonstrations eventually developed into a violent [revolutionary uprising](#) in an attempt to overthrow the government. The revolutionaries took over Asturias by force, killing many of the province's police and religious leaders.^[2] Armed with dynamite, rifles, and machine guns, they destroyed religious buildings, such as churches and convents.^{[3][4]} The rebels officially declared a [Proletarian Revolution](#) and instituted a local government in the territory.^[5] The rebellion was crushed by the [Spanish Navy](#) and the [Spanish Republican Army](#), the latter using mainly colonial troops from Spanish Morocco.^[6]

The war minister, [Diego Hidalgo](#) wanted [Francisco Franco](#) to lead the troops against the rebellion but Spain's president, [Alcalá Zamora](#), opted to send general [Eduardo López Ochoa](#) to Asturias to lead the government forces in an effort to limit the bloodshed.^{[7][8]} Soldiers from the [Civil Guard](#), colonial troops, and the [Spanish Legion](#) were dispatched under López Ochoa and Colonel Juan Yagüe to relieve the besieged government garrisons and to retake the towns from the miners. The brevity of the confrontation led historian [Gabriel Jackson](#) to observe

"every form of fanaticism and cruelty which was to characterise the Civil War occurred during the October revolution and its aftermath: utopian revolution marred by sporadic red terror; systematically bloody repression by the 'forces of order'; confusion and demoralisation of the moderate left; fanatical vengefulness on the part of the right."^[9]

The revolt has been regarded as "the first battle of" or "the prelude to" the [Spanish Civil War](#).^[8] According to hispanist [Edward Malefakis](#), the Spanish left had rejected "legal processes of government" and revolted against the possibility of a right-led coalition. Even though they would later use the "legality" argument to condemn the July 1936 right-wing coup, their own uprising was also itself against an elected government.^[10] Historian [Salvador de Madariaga](#), a supporter of [Manuel Azaña](#), and an exiled vocal opponent of [Francisco Franco](#) asserted that:

"The uprising of 1934 is unforgivable. The argument that [the conservatives] tried to destroy the Constitution to establish fascism was, at once, hypocritical and false. [With the rebellion], the Spanish left was

The majority vote in the 1933 elections was won by the conservative Spanish Confederation of the Autonomous Right (CEDA). President Alcalá-Zamora declined to invite its leader, Gil Robles, to form a government. Instead he invited the Radical Republican Party's Alejandro Lerroux to do so. Despite receiving the most votes, CEDA was denied cabinet positions for nearly a year.^[12] After a year of political pressure, CEDA, the largest party in the congress, was finally successful in forcing the acceptance of three ministries. However the entrance of CEDA in the government, although being normal in a parliamentary democracy, was not well accepted by the left. When the plans to invite members of the right-wing CEDA into government were leaked, the political left was distraught.^[13] The left tried to reach a common formula of protest but were hampered because the formation of a new government was the result of a normal parliamentary process and that the parties coming to government had won the previous year's free elections. The issue was that the left identified the Republic not with democracy or constitutional law but a specific set of policies and politicians, and any deviation was seen as treasonous.^[14] That triggered revolutionary strikes and uprisings in Asturias and in Catalonia as well as small incidents in other places in Spain, all a part of the Revolution of 1934.

Lead figures

At the same time, CEDA could hardly be seen as a democratic force. It called for the revision of the republican constitution, with the aim to create a new regime and defend "Christian civilization" from leftism and Marxism.^[15] Its leader, [José María Gil-Robles](#), declared his intention to "give Spain a true unity, a new spirit, a totalitarian polity..." and went on to say "Democracy is not an end but a mean to achieve the conquest of the new state. When the time comes, either parliament submits or we will [eliminate it](#)."^[16] The CEDA held fascist-style rallies, called Gil-Robles "Jefe", the equivalent of [Duce](#), and claimed that the CEDA might lead a "March on Madrid" (similar to the Italian [Fascist March on Rome](#)) to forcefully seize power.^[17] The fact that this force won a relative majority in the congress, made many republicans fear a return to the monarchy or a dictatorship like [that of Miguel Primo de Rivera](#), and hardened the most radical left in its belief that a fascist danger was rising and a revolution necessary.

 Belarmino Tomás	 Alejandro Lerroux
 Ramón González Peña	 Diego Hidalgo
 Ramón Álvarez Palomo	 Eduardo López Ochoa
	 Francisco Franco
	 Juan Yagüe
Casualties and losses	
1,700 dead 15,000–30,000 captured	260 dead

Preparations

The rebels had stockpiled rifles and pistols, leading to general [Emilio Mola](#) calling them the "best armed" of all the leftist insurrections of interwar Europe. Most of the rifles came from a shipment of arms supplied by [Indalecio Prieto](#), a socialist party moderate. The rifles had been landed by the yacht *Turquesa* at [Pravia](#), north-west of Oviedo; Prieto swiftly fled to France to avoid arrest. Other weapons came from captured arms factories in the region and the miners also had their dynamite blasting charges, which were known as "la artillería de la revolución."^[18] Plans to subvert police and army units failed as these groups, even those with leftist sympathies, refused to join the rebels. Most planned armed revolts involving militiamen did not go ahead and the others were easily crushed by the authorities.^[19] A "[Catalan State](#)", proclaimed by Catalan nationalist leader [Lluís Companys](#), lasted just ten hours, and despite an attempt at a general stoppage in [Madrid](#), other strikes did not endure. In Madrid, strikers occupied the ministry of the interior and a few military centres, a few of them firing pistols, yet they were soon rounded up by security forces. In the north there were revolutionary strikes in mining areas and clashes with the security forces that left 40 people dead, but the revolt was ended with the arrival of troops and the Spanish air force launching bomb attacks.^[18] This left [Asturian](#) strikers to fight alone.^[20] [Anarchist](#) and [communist](#) factions in Spain had called [general strikes](#). However, the strikes immediately exposed differences on the left

between the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE)-linked [Unión General de Trabajadores](#) (UGT), which organised the strike, and the [anarcho-syndicalist](#) trade union, the Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (CNT).^[21] As a result, the strikes failed in much of the country.

Strike and rising



Location of Asturias in Spain

In several [coal mining](#) towns in Asturias, where the [Central Asturian Carboniferous Basin](#) is located, local unions gathered small weaponry in preparation for the strike. It began on the evening of 4 October, with the miners occupying several towns, attacking and seizing local [Civil](#) and [Assault Guard](#) barracks.^[22] At dawn on 5 October, the rebels attacked the Brothers' school in [Turón](#). The Brothers and the Passionist Father were captured and imprisoned in the "[House of the People](#)" while waiting for a decision from the revolutionary Committee. Under pressure from extremists, the Committee decided to condemn them to death.^[23] Thirty four priests, six young seminarists with ages between 18 and 21, and several businessmen and civil guards were summarily executed by the revolutionaries in [Mieres](#) and [Sama](#), 58 religious buildings including churches, convents and part of the [university at Oviedo](#) were burned and destroyed.^{[24][25]}

The same day, large groups of miners advanced along the road to [Oviedo](#), the provincial capital. With the exception of two barracks in which fighting with the garrison of 1,500 government troops continued, the city was taken by 6 October. The miners proceeded to occupy several other towns, most notably the large industrial centre of [La Felguera](#), and set up town assemblies, or "revolutionary committees", to govern the towns that they controlled.^[24]

Taking Oviedo, the rebels were able to seize the city's arsenal gaining 24,000 rifles, carbines and light and heavy machine guns.^[26] Recruitment offices [drafted](#) all workers between the ages of eighteen and forty for the 'Red Army'. Thirty thousand workers had been mobilized for battle within ten days.^[24] In the occupied areas the rebels officially declared the proletarian revolution and abolished regular money.^[5] The [revolutionary soviets](#) set up by the miners attempted to impose

order on the areas under their control, and the moderate socialist leadership of [Ramón González Peña](#) and [Belarmino Tomás](#) took measures to restrain violence. However, a number of captured priests, businessmen and civil guards were summarily executed by the revolutionaries in Mieres and Sama.^[24]

Government response

The government in Madrid was now facing a civil war and called on two of its senior generals, [Manuel Goded](#) and [Francisco Franco](#), to co-ordinate the suppression of what had become a major rebellion. Goded and Franco recommended the use of regular units of colonial troops from [Spanish Morocco](#), instead of the inexperienced conscripts of the Peninsular Army. War Minister [Diego Hidalgo](#) agreed that the latter would be at a disadvantage in combat against the well-organised miners, who were skilled in the use of dynamite. Historian [Hugh Thomas](#) asserts that Hidalgo said that he did not want young inexperienced recruits fighting their own people and he was wary of moving troops to Asturias leaving the rest of Spain unprotected. In 1932, Manuel Azaña had also called the [Tercio](#) and the [regulares](#) (colonial troops) from North Africa to join in the suppression.

The war minister, Diego Hidalgo, wanted Franco to lead the troops but President Alcalá Zamora selected General [López Ochoa](#), a Republican, to lead the government forces in order to minimize possible bloodshed.^[7] Soldiers from the civil guards, Moroccan [Regulares](#) and the [Spanish Legion](#) were accordingly organized under General [Eduardo López Ochoa](#) and Colonel Juan de Yagüe to relieve the besieged government garrisons and to retake the towns from the miners. During the operations, an [autogyro](#) made a reconnaissance flight for the government troops in what was the first military employment of a [rotorcraft](#).^[27]

Repression

On October 7, delegates from the anarchist-controlled seaport towns of [Gijón](#) and [Avilés](#) arrived in Oviedo to request weapons to defend against a landing of government troops. Ignored by the socialist UGT-controlled committee, the delegates returned to their town empty-handed, and government troops met little resistance as they recaptured Gijón and Avilés the following day.^[28] On the same day, the cruiser *Libertad* and two gunboats reached Gijón, where they fired on the workers at the shore. Bombers also attacked coalfields and Oviedo.^[18] After two weeks of heavy fighting (and a death toll estimated between 1,200 and 2,000), the rebellion was suppressed. General López Ochoa ordered the summary executions of six [legionnaires](#) and Moroccan [colonial troops](#) for raping, torturing, and murdering prisoners, some of whom had been hacked to death.^[29] Historian [Javier Tusell](#) argues that although Franco had a leading role, giving instructions from Madrid, that does not

mean he took part in the illegal repressive activities.^[30] According to Tussell it was López de Óchoa, a republican freemason who had been appointed by President Zamora to lead the repression in the field, who was unable to limit bloodshed.^[30]

Aftermath

In the days following the strike, Spain's prime minister, Lerroux, was widely seen as the country's "savior". In turn, groups of socialists, anarchists and communists put forth a variety of propaganda justifying the rebellion and representing the suppressing as a martyrdom.^[31] In the armed action taken against the uprising, some 1,500 miners were killed, with another 30,000 to 40,000 taken prisoner^{[32][33]} and thousands more became unemployed.^[34] The repression of the uprising carried out by the colonial troops included looting, rape and summary executions.^{[35][36]} Lisardo Doval, a civil guard commander and major-general, was responsible for many of these repression strategies.^[18] According to Hugh Thomas, 2,000 people died in the uprising: 230-260 military and police, 33 priests, 1,500 miners in combat and 200 individuals killed in the repression. Among those killed, journalist Luis de Sirval was a well-known opponent of tortures and executions, eventually being arrested and killed by three officers of the Legion.^[33] Stanley Payne, an American historian, estimates that the rebel's armed conflict killed between 50 and 100 people and that the government conducted up to 100 summary executions, while 15 million pesetas were stolen from banks, most of which was never recovered and would go on to fund further revolutionary activity.^[8]

Due to martial law and censorship, little or no information was officially made public; a group of Socialist deputies carried out a private investigation and published an independent report that discounted most of the publicized killings but that confirmed prevalent instances of beatings and torture.^[37] The political right demanded severe punishment for the insurrection, while the political left insisted on amnesty for what they viewed as a labour strike and political protest that got out control.^[38] The government response in the aftermath of the rebellion varied in tact and strategy.^[39] The government suspended constitutional guarantees and almost all of the left's newspapers were closed, as they were owned by the parties that had promoted the uprising. Hundreds of town councils and mixed juries were suspended.^[40] Prison torture continued to be prevalent and widespread in the aftermath of the protests.^[41] There were no mass killing after the fighting was over. All death sentences were commuted aside from two: army sergeant and deserter Diego Vázquez, who fought alongside the miners, and a worker known as "El Pichilatu", who had committed serial killings. Little effort was made to suppress the organisations that had carried out the insurrection, resulting in most being functional again by 1935. Support for fascism remained minimal, while civil liberties were restored in full by 1935, after which the revolutionaries had opportunity to pursue power through electoral means.^[39] Ramón González Peña, the leader of the

Oviedo Revolutionary Committee was sentenced to death but was reprieved one year later. González later served as the president of [Unión General de Trabajadores](#), in which he was in conflict with [Largo Caballero](#). He was also a Member of Parliament and was the Minister of Justice from 1938 to 1939.^{[42][43]} After the [Spanish Civil War](#) González Peña went to exile in [Mexico](#), where he died on 27 July 1952.^[44]

Franco was convinced that the workers' uprising had been "carefully prepared by the agents of Moscow", informed by material he gathered from the Entente Anticomuniste of Geneva. Historian [Paul Preston](#) wrote: "Unmoved by the fact that the central symbol of rightist values was the reconquest of Spain from the Moors, Franco shipped Moorish mercenaries to fight in Asturias. He saw no contradiction about using the Moors, because he regarded left-wing workers with the same racist contempt he possessed towards the tribesmen of the Rif."^[45] Franco, visiting [Oviedo](#) after the rebellion had been put down, stated; "this war is a frontier war and its fronts are socialism, communism and whatever attacks civilization in order to replace it with barbarism".^[46] The right-wing press portrayed the Asturian rebels in xenophobic and [anti-Semitic](#) terms as the tools of a foreign [Jewish-Bolshevik](#) conspiracy.^[47] Franco believed the government needed to reprimand the rebels, otherwise it would only encourage further revolutionary activity.^[48]

Civil War

Historians have often regarded Asturias as the "first battle" or "prelude" of the Spanish Civil War.^[49] The left's leaders would never publicly admit to wrong-doing in the turn to mass violence in Asturias, though they would accept that they could not use such methods to obtain power in the immediate future.^[50] The suppression of the Asturias rebellion re-enforced political backing between the Republican right and the national army, a dynamic described by Calvo Sotelo as "the backbone of the Fatherland."^[51] When the Popular Front was formed in 1936, one of its proposals was to free all those who were imprisoned for taking part in the Asturias rebellion; this proposal angered the Spanish right, who regarded freeing those who had violently revolted against the legally elected government as an indicator that the Spanish left would not respect constitutional government and the rule of law.^[18]

At the outbreak of the [Spanish Civil War](#), López Ochoa was in a military hospital in [Carabanchel](#) and was awaiting trial, accused of responsibility for the deaths of 20 civilians at a barracks in [Oviedo](#). Given the [violence occurring throughout Madrid](#), the government attempted to move Ochoa from the hospital to a safer location but was twice prevented from doing so by large hostile crowds. A third attempt was made under the pretence that Ochoa was already dead, but the ruse was exposed and the general was taken away. [Paul Preston](#) states that an anarchist dragged him from the coffin in which he was lying and shot him in the hospital garden. His head was hacked off, stuck on a pole

and publicly paraded. His remains were then displayed with a sign reading "This is the butcher of Asturias."^{[52][29]}

The [eight martyrs of Turon](#) were [venerated](#) on 7 September 1989, and beatified by Pope [John Paul II](#).^[53]

See also

- Revolution of 1934
- [Events of 6 October](#)
- [Ramón González Peña](#)
- Révolte dans les Asturies*, play by [Albert Camus](#)

Notes

- In the original: “El alzamiento de 1934 es imperdonable. La decisión del presidente de la República de llamar al poder a la CEDA era inatacable y hasta debida desde hacía ya tiempo. El argumento de que el señor Gil Robles intentaba destruir la Constitución para instaurar el fascismo era, a la vez, hipócrita y falso. Con la rebelión de 1934, la izquierda española perdió hasta la sombra de autoridad para condenar la rebelión de 1936.”

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- [Hayes 1951](#), p. 96.
- [Orella Martínez & Mizerska-Wrotkowska 2015](#).
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- [Payne 2004](#), p. 55.
- [Ealham 2005](#), p. 54.
- [Hodges 2002](#).
- [Payne & Palacios 2014](#), p. 90.
- [Jackson 1972](#), p. 167.

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29. Preston 2012, p. 269.
30. Tusell 1992, p. 19.
31. Hayes 1951.
32. Jackson 1972, p. 161.
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35. Beevor 2006, pp. 31–32.
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Further reading

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- Documents on the strike and its aftermath from "Trabajadores: The Spanish Civil War through the eyes of organised labour" (<http://contentdm.warwick.ac.uk/cdm/search/collection/scw/searchterm/1934/field/search/mode/all/conn/and/order/ref>) Archived (<https://web.archive.org/web/20160304200116/http://contentdm.warwick.ac.uk/cdm/search/collection/scw/searchterm/1934/field/search/mode/all/conn/and/order/ref>) 2016-03-04 at the [Wayback Machine](#), a digitised collection of more than 13,000 pages of documents from the archives of the British [Trades Union Congress](#) held in the [Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick](#)